ECSTASY AND THE PROPHETS
ROBERT L. ALDEN, A.B.

The use of the term "ecstasy" to describe the state of revelation in the Old Testament is not altogether modern. The "deep sleep" (tardema) of Abraham in Genesis 15:12 is rendered by ἐκστασις in the Septuagint. The Greek translators also chose that term to describe Daniel's trembling at the great vision (10:7).1 Rab, the celebrated Babylonian Amora and founder of the academy in Sura (d. 247 B.C.), in reference to Genesis 15:12, called Abraham's deep sleep the "deep sleep of prophecy."2

Tertullian used the word in his discourse "On the Soul."
This power we call "ecstasy," a deprivation of the senses which is an image of insanity... [Citing Gen. 2:21, the tardema falling on Adam] Sleep brought rest to the body, but ecstasy came over the soul and prevented it from resting, and from that time this combination constitutes the natural and normal form of the dream.3 Elsewhere he said:

When a man is rapt in the Spirit, especially when he beholds the glory of God, or when God speaks through him, he necessarily loses his sensation because he is overshadowed with the power of God.4

Origen denied this and similar views of ecstasy.5 Most of the ancient discussions of the matter centered on ecstasy among the people present and not on the prophets of a former era. Another focus was on inspiration but the word "ecstasy" was not used in this connection.

Apart from mystics who engaged in their own kind of ecstasy, no one until modern times paid any attention to the matter.6 Duhm was the

1. ἐκστασις occurs twenty-seven times in the Old Testament translating eleven different Hebrew words. Most of them mean "fear" or the like.
first to draw attention to so-called ecstatic elements in the prophets.7 Gunkel8 and Holscher9 followed and popularized the theory. T. H. Robinson was the most notable exponent of it in England.10 Robert Pfeiffer espoused it in America.11 The psychologists and comparative religions students joined their support to this characterization of the Hebrew prophets.12

Definitions are abundant and diverse. Here are three typical ones.

Abraham Heschel wrote:

From the viewpoint of psychology, ecstasy is a "withdrawal of consciousness from circumference to center;" a state in which the absorption of the mind in one idea, in one desire, is so profound that everything else is blotted out.13

Johannes Lindblom remarked: "When inspiration strongly intensified it turned to ecstasy."14 And N. W. Porteous commented:

...The appropriate term to apply when an overmastering emotion of whatsoever kind produces a state of exaltation or stupefaction in which the mind is obsessed by a single idea or group of ideas to the exclusion of all other ideas, or one or more senses is abnormally stimulated, with accompanying suspension of the other bodily functions.15

7. Die Theologie der Propheten (Bonn: Marcus, 1875); Israels Propheten (Tubingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1922), The first modern psychoanalysis of prophecy was Wilhelm Wundt, Volkerpsychologie (9 vols. Leipzig: Engelmann, 1904-18).


13. P. 324.


These definitions hardly come from the Bible itself. The temporal distance is so great and the material so limited, to say nothing of the altogether different world in which they operated, that we will never get an accurate picture of it. As Lindblom says elsewhere: "In analysing prophetic personalities it must always be kept in mind that inspiration and ecstasy have many degrees and many manifestations." These range between Abraham and Paul; a span hardly satisfied by one definition.

Then there is the additional question of inscripturation. Are the records we have the product of the author as he wrote it, or is what we have the end of an indeterminable period of written and/or oral tradition? In regards to ecstasy some have blamed it on the editors. Others, such as Mowinckel, bow out of the discussion by consigning the whole matter to the psychologists. Still others have gone to the opposite extreme (and there are more of these) and have completely psychoanalyzed the prophet and found him ready for commitment. Classifying the accounts of ecstasy as literary devices is another system that has been used.

While there are those who connect the word "ecstasy" with all kinds of frowned-upon activities, there are those who, though not abandoning the term, mean only the mild excitement which each of us occasionally shows.

In addition to "vision" and "dream" which are biblical words, ecstasy is attached to hallucination, frenzy, mania, unconsciousness, subconsciousness, clairvoyance, and many more such textbook terms. One of the classical extra-biblical etymological arguments (!) is the Egyptian hieroglyph for "to fall into ecstasy" in the Wen Amon story. It pictures

a figure with waving arms and dancing legs. 24 Jacobi said that ecstasy was the essence of the prophets. 25

Let us conclude the matter of defining the word by noting Guillaume’s quip: “Ecstasy... is a plant of dubious origin and associations” 26 and casting the lot with Heschel when he wrote:

The truth is that revelation is a problem that eludes scientific inquiry; that no scholar has ever devised a lens to pierce its mystery. Biblical criticism may have succeeded in finding spots in the sun and in compelling us to modify our conception of how the text was transmitted, but the act of revelation remains beyond its scope. 27

We have noted the major proponents of the ecstatic theory. To them we might add many more. 28

R. B. Taylor saw three types of ecstasy in the Old Testament represented respectively by Samuel (concerned with domestic matters), Balaam (concerned with the future), and Saul (concerned with rousing nationalism in a time of crisis and oppression). 29 Ezekiel, however, more frequently serves as an example of ecstasy. Pfeiffer said: “Ezekiel was the first fanatic of the Bible” and “Like most fanatics, Ezekiel was dogmatic... In ecstatic trance he saw visions and heard voices.” 30 Beryl Cohon bunches all the early prophets together, the false along with Elisha and calls them “mad enthusiasts.” 31 One of the most radical analyses of Ezekiel appeared a decade ago in the Journal of Biblical Literature where he was termed a “paranoid schizophrenic,” and “true psychotic (unrecognized in his day and looked upon as an ecstatic),” having “a narcissistic-masochistic conflict with attendant phantasies of castration and unconscious sexual regression” etc. 32

On the other hand we find men using the term “ecstasy” when they mean something quite different. Hengstenberg, for instance, in the appendix of his Christologie said:

30. P. 543.
Es ist nach allem, was wir ausgeführt haben, nicht zu verken-
nen, dass sich die biblischen Propheten nicht minder wie die
heidnischen Seher in einer ξυστασίς befanden.33

Later he criticized Haervnick for being inconsistent in posting visions
but denying ecstasy.34 Hengstenberg had something different in mind
from some of the definitions given above. He equates ecstasy with
vision. Franz Delitzsch employed a similar watered-down meaning
when he said:

Jeder tiefe Schlaf ist zwar, inwiefern die Seele aus ihrer
Bezogenheit auf die Aussenwelt in ihre Beziehung auf sich
selbst und den Geist und durch ihn auf Gott entrickt wird,
eine ξυστασίς (LXX fur tardema), aber es gibt auch eine schlaf-
und traumähnliche Verinnerung im Wachzustande, die sich
dermassen steigern kann, dass der Mensch über die Grenzen
seines diesseitigen Lebensbereiches hinausgeruckt wird und mit
einer seiner sonstigen Wahrnehmung entzogenen jenseitigen
Welt in Beruhrung tritt... Das ist die Ekstase (...2 Cor. 5,
13...).35

Another difference prevails between these latter two views and those
represented by Holscher and company. Ecstasy arises either from natural
or humanly initiated efforts or it is a gift from above. The latter is
theo-tropic; the former anthropotropic. We ought to also consider that
these citations are from older works, works written before the populariz-
ing of the term “ecstasy.”

A third group of scholars dislikes the use of the word in any sense
to describe the Hebrew prophets. They represent a far wider circle
than evangelicals. Antonin Causse who has several books and articles
on prophecy said: “...Nous ne croyons pas que l’exstase puisse etre
vraiment consideree comme etant ‘a’ la base de la vie religieuse
prophete,”36 Moses Buttenwieser, one-time professor of Bible at Hebrew
Union College wrote in a similar vein. “The inspiration of the great
literary prophets has nothing in common with the ecstasy of the prophets
of the older type.”37 He was not averse to considering the former
prophets ecstatic but categorically denied it in the latter. Heschel, like-

33. P. 174. Eng. P. 361: “After all that has been adduced, it will be impossible to
arrive at any other conclusion than that it was in an ξυστασίς that the biblical
prophets prophesied, as well as the heathen seers.”
35. P. 285. Eng. p. 335: “Every deep sleep, indeed, so far as the soul is withdrawn
from its relation to the outer world into its relation to itself and the spirit, and
through the spirit of God, is an ξυστασίς (LXX, for tardema); but there is
also in the waking state an internal withdrawing like to sleeping and dreaming,
which may arise to such a point, that the man is taken out beyond the limits
of the region of his temporal life, and comes into contact with a remote world
withdrawn from his usual perception...This is ecstasy (...2 Cor. v. 13...)
36. “Quelques remarques sur la psychologie des prophètes,” Revue d’Histoire et
de Philosophie Religieuses, II (1922), p. 354.
wise, is most adamant when the discussion revolves around the literary prophets.

It is strange that in all the discussions of prophetic ecstasy, scholars overlooked the significant fact that in the leading prophetic figures between the time of Moses and the time of Amos, no sign of ecstasy is reported.38

A third Jewish scholar, Yehezkel Kaufmann, noted that the process is reversed in the Bible as compared with heathen prophecy.39 Ecstasy is consequent on the word of God in the Bible. Ecstasy did not affect the word.

We could quote similar statements from such diverse sources as F. James' Personalities of the Old Testament.40 William Robertson Smith,41 John Bright,42 G. C. Joyce,43 H. Junker,44 Aalders,45 Micklam,46 and Seierstad.47 We find anti-ecstatic interpretations as well in numerous evangelical, Roman Catholic, and conservative Jewish authors.

The classic among the conservative protestant contenders for sobriety among the prophets was F. Eduard Konig. (Cf. also Joseph Addison Alexander.)48) He, in a book worthy of translation, Der Offenbarungsbegriff des Alten Testaments, emphasized again and again the mental clarity of the prophets and the self-consciousness which they preserved even in the moment of their call, and denied that ecstasy had any significance for the rise of prophetism.49 A briefer English statement of his views appears under "Prophecy (Hebrew)" in the Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics.50

A brief glance at any of the authors who propose an ecstatic explanation for the prophets of Israel will show how much they rest their case on extra-biblical phenomena.51 Nearly all religions from the ancient

38. The Prophets, p. 354.
44. Prophet und Seher in Israel (Trier: Paulinus Verlag, 1927).
45. De Profeten des Ouden Verbonde (Kampen: Kok, 1918).
47. "Erlebnis und Gehorsam beim Propheten Amos." Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft, LII (1934), pp. 22-41; Die Offenbarungserlebnisse der Propheten Amos, Isaiah und Jeremiah (Oslo: Dybwad, 1946). This latter work was challenged by Mowinckel, "Ekstatiska Innslag i Profetenes Oplevelser," Norsk Teologisk Tidsskrift, XLIX (1948), pp. 129-221.
49. (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs'che Buchhandlung, 1882), I, p. 48 et al.
Babylonian cults to the mystic Eastern faiths as well as certain branches of Christianity have members who become ecstatic. They dance, they lose consciousness, they rave, they even utter prophecy. Most of these features are absent from most of the biblical prophets. What parallels are drawn are quite inconclusive since centuries of years as well as of miles separate the examples cited.

As with many questions that have no clear-cut answers, the reason lies in the insufficiency of evidence. The Hebrews, unlike the Greeks, did not have a word for everything. One of the words they did not have was “ecstasy.” In fact, there are very few “psychological” (for lack of a better term) words in the Old Testament. We must deduce our psychology or theology from the concrete terms they used in not-so-concrete ways. How do you explain ecstasy using concrete terms only? We must get our understanding of the Hebrew prophetic mind from such words as gala—“reveal,” haga—“meditate,” hoza—“envisage” or its cognates, halam—“dream,” raah—“see” or “show” (hiphil), or the various ways in which ruah—“spirit” was used.

When we come right down to the positive evidence, there is not one clear instance of a true prophet of Jahweh going into ecstasy—meaning by that term some sort of irresponsible delirium or rage. Saul (1 Sam. 19:24) and the priests of Baal on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18:26-29) are good examples of the kind of thing the proponents of ecstasy see everywhere. However, even though Saul “prophesied” or “acted like a nabi” (yitnabi), we do not read that he either received or communicated any message from God which functions characterize those we generally classify as true prophets of God.52 If we dilute the meaning of ecstasy, eliminating wild enthusiasm, we might fit Ezekiel into the definition. If we further unload the term we might all qualify to join the habal nazim (“band of the prophets;” 1 Sam. 10:10).

If, with Holscher and T. H. Robinson, every time we see the expression “Thus saith the LORD” or “The word of the LORD came....” we understand an ecstatic utterance, then we arrive at nearly one thousand instances of ecstasy in the Old Testament.

The first conclusion we arrive at is obvious. There is no adequate and accurate definition of “ecstasy.” Hardly any two authors agree although many are of one mind that the prophets were ecstatic.

Since the word generally has derogatory overtones in our language (apart from its Greek etymology) and is used almost exclusively to describe pagan religious action, we do well not to use it to describe the Hebrew prophets. Since neither they themselves nor sympathetic hearers viewed their actions as ecstatic we ought not to so categorize

52. Admittedly 1 Sam. 19:24 is problematical because it implies that it was the regular procedure for the prophets under Samuel to strip off their clothes and lie naked day and night. But here again we can note marked differences between these and other pre-literary prophets such as Balaam or Elijah whose divine messages we have.
them. To us who maintain the suigeneris nature of God's dealing with the Hebrew nation and the Christian church, this should be an especially heavy consideration. We read in 1 Corinthians 14:32: "And the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets."

There is no good definition of ecstasy. Popular usage has made it into a bad thing. There is no evidence whatever in the Bible for the actions usually denoted by ecstasy. Therefore I propose the Abandonment of the term as one to describe the true prophets of Israel.

Hebrew Union College
Cincinnati, Ohio